



## Augusta Judicial Circuit

Administrative Office of the Courts  
530 Greene Street, Suite 902  
Augusta, Georgia 30901-4452

Office of Drug Court  
Ted Wiggins, Jr., Coordinator

Telephone (706) 823-4424  
FAX (706) 821-1947

# NEWS

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Contact: Ted Wiggins, Drug Court Coordinator

E-mail: [twiggins@augustaga.gov](mailto:twiggins@augustaga.gov)

### *Local Drug Court Celebrates “National Drug Court Month” Progress Conference scheduled for May 21, 2009, 11:30 a.m. Superior Courtroom I, Augusta City-County Municipal Building*

Augusta, GA, 21 May 2009 – In celebration of “National Drug Court Month”, the Augusta Judicial Circuit Drug Court will hold a Progress Conference on 21 May 2009 at 11:30 a.m. in Superior Courtroom I (Room 202) of the Augusta City-County Municipal Building, 530 Greene Street, Augusta, Georgia. The Honorable James G. Blanchard, Jr. is the local superior court judge assigned the task of establishing a drug court in the Augusta Circuit. He began researching the program in 2006 and was instrumental in bringing the program to life in March of last year, with the AJC Drug Court first convening in August, 2008.

“National Drug Court Month” is coordinated on a national level by the National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP), which was established in 1994 to assist the planning, implementation, and operation of Drug Courts. This year marks a historic milestone in the Drug Court movement reflected in May’s National Drug Court Month theme: “Celebrating Twenty Years of Drug Court: Restoring Lives, Reuniting families and Making Communities Safer.” What started in a Florida court room in 1989 has become the nation’s most successful strategy for dealing with substance abusing offenders and has led to inspirational testimonies from the participants and great savings to our citizens (calculable in terms of crime reduction and revitalizing families).

The jails in this country are full of substance abusers. These problems – drug and alcohol addictions –have led to the commission of crimes, disruption of society, destruction of families and the ruin of individuals. As a society, we cannot excuse criminal behavior or thinking, but if we do not address the root causes of that behavior the crimes will continue. The AJC Drug Court offers addicted offenders the chance to break the cycle of crime and abuse by addressing both their addiction and their criminal behavior. The work is hard and the



responsibility to change rests solely on the shoulders of the individual, but change is possible. Individual lives and entire families can be salvaged. Our community can be a safer, healthier place to live. "Without innovative approaches like the treatment program utilized by our drug court, you couldn't build enough jails and prisons to accommodate the growing demand," said Mr. Wiggins, the coordinator for the Augusta Circuit's first-ever drug court program.

Like many of the 2,301 operational drug courts in the United States the AJC Drug Court hears cases of offenders charged with drug and alcohol related crimes (alcohol-only addiction is excluded at this time). Drug Courts relieve already overwhelmed court dockets, placing offenders in an environment where they undergo treatment and counseling, submit to frequent and random drug testing, make regular appearances before the judge and are monitored closely for program compliance. "We are pleased with the progress reported by our professional staff as participants work through the program. The counseling and constant monitoring serve as a check-and-balance system as we daily observe and verify compliance with our treatment goals; it is not easy on those in the program," said Judge Blanchard. Additionally, AJCDC participants are required to complete their education and gain employable skills, or remain employed if not in school. Graduated sanctions, including community service and jail time are imposed for noncompliance. Alternatively, incentives are applied for program compliance. And like the other 2,301 operational Drug Courts, this program works better than jail or prison, better than probation, and better than treatment alone. "The ultimate goal," continued Judge Blanchard, "is to make our community a safer place for all of our citizens. We want to relieve taxpayers from the burden of supporting otherwise counterproductive citizens. We see this progress on a monthly basis as each of these participants work their way to a life free of chemical dependency, a life that can actually contribute to the community."

"I have learned in the past 6 months there is a better way. I am clean, in my kids' life now and learning to live a sober lifestyle" said one participant; another said, "The Program has taught me I cannot control my drug use on my own. I have learned how to stay clean for the first time in my life."

Nationally, more than 70 percent of Drug Court participants have successfully completed the program or remain as active participants, and the cost of Drug Court programs are significantly less than the cost of incarceration in the traditional court system. The AJCDC requires participants to pay a monthly fee which greatly reduces that cost. A recent study by the Department of Justice found a cost/benefit of \$3.36 for every \$1.00 invested in treating drug-addicted offenders under the watchful eye of Drug Court. "In twenty years Drug Court has been one of the most researched programs in the criminal justice system," said NADCP CEO West Huddleston. "The scientific community has put Drug Court under the microscope and concluded that they work. In fact, Drug Courts significantly reduce drug abuse and crime and do so at less expense than any other justice strategy."

"The AJCDC is not only helping its participants develop an independence from drug addiction but also a renewed sense of purpose and commitment to serving their community. This program is changing the face of the AJC justice system," said Mr. Wiggins. "However, we are in the first year of our program and while other circuits have a head start on us, we can already see tremendous benefits to our area. And those benefits will increase commensurate with the growth of our treatment program which is exciting for our citizens as we will review on the 21<sup>st</sup>," explained Mr. Wiggins. The conference is open and everyone is encouraged to attend.

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### **About the AJC Drug Court**

Augusta's first Drug Court was founded less than one year ago to address growing substance-abuse related crimes under the leadership of the Honorable James G. Blanchard, Jr. (Judge, Superior Court), Ted Wiggins, a 18 year veteran of the Georgia State Felony Probation Office, District Attorney Ashley Wright and with the assistance of Mr. Sam Sibley and the Augusta Public Defenders Office. In cooperation with Jones Behavioral Health, Inc. and Mullins Laboratory, and with the full support of the areas' County Commissioners and Sheriffs' Offices, they created a unique program that operates outside of the confines of traditional crime and punishment, but still existing within the framework dictated by Georgia Statutes.

Today the AJC Drug Court has approximately 46 participants in various stages of treatment and sobriety. It is a two year program so they will not see graduates until 2010. Its participants are served by professionals from the court, the sheriff's office, the state's probation and parole offices, the public defenders office, the defense bar, and local treatment professionals. "This is our circuit's first year participating in this innovative program and the results are very encouraging as we will review on the 21<sup>st</sup>," explained Mr. Wiggins, the AJCDC Coordinator. "The conference is open to everyone interested, please join us."

### **About NADCP**

The National Association of Drug Court Professionals (NADCP), a not-for-profit organization located in the Nation's Capital, was founded in 1994 by a group of judicial visionaries to reverse the growing impact of drug-related crime. They created a court model using a combination of accountability and treatment to compel and support drug-using offenders to change their lives. From that vision came the Drug Court movement and the NADCP. In 1997, NADCP and the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) then partnered to create the National Drug Court Institute (NDCI), the professional services branch NADCP.

Today, NADCP is the premier national membership, training and advocacy organization for Drug Courts, representing over 22,000 multi-disciplinary Drug Court professionals. NADCP hosts the largest annual training conference on drugs and crime in the nation and annually provides over 80 Drug Court training and technical assistance events, benefiting tens of thousands of drug court professionals. NADCP/NDCI continues to write, publish, and disseminate scholastic and practical publications that are critical to the ongoing growth and fidelity of the Drug Court model and works tirelessly on Capitol Hill and in state legislatures to transform the American justice system through policy, legislation and appropriations. NADCP can be found online at [www.NADCP.org](http://www.NADCP.org)